

Ethnicity and Identity: Some Interpretative Suggestions

The texts collected in the present volume pertain to the current problems of identity in those European countries which have seen rapid and substantial political changes since 1989. These changes have had far-reaching consequences: from internal transformations to the dissolution of existing states.

After the tragic war in the Balkans, after the break-up of Czechoslovakia and other changes in specific countries, the nations – now organised within new, autonomous state structures, unencumbered by the unwanted alliances and federations, and having regained freedom to organise society the way they wanted, have had to define anew their symbolic universe, which they could invoke while building ethnic and national links of a new type. Having reclaimed their own historical heritage from shared history, they have made a fresh start with a historical ballast of stereotype, myth and prejudice to blot out the recent memories of a federation created by decree or a forced alliance. For the cultural anthropologist, this provides a unique opportunity to observe the ongoing process of formation or recomposition of numerous symbolic spheres in the cultures of the respective nations.

Such observations can be made in a variety of ways. One can assume the position of a disinterested, external observer, taking account of all the elements, situations and mechanisms of the new, emerging cultural reality. It should be remembered, however, that access to this reality is possible mainly through the media. These, in turn – in their modern form – have the capacity to provide an almost intrusive insight into the lives of individuals. As a result, we get the illusion of being able to diagnose the situation correctly and effortlessly. On the other hand, as conscious anthropologists, we should not succumb to this illusion: the media create a world in its own right. Our methodology imposes upon us an obligation to confront things. Our external observations should be juxtaposed with the convictions of the participants in the processes in question.

The publisher of *Prace Etnograficzne* – a Jagiellonian University academic series – the Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology Department of the University, has created an opportunity to do just this, by inviting young research anthropologists from Central Europe to take part in a joint project, consisting of, first, a conference and then the publication of a proceedings volume devoted to these fascinating developments. This volume provides a forum for anthropologists from different countries to speak in their

own voice about the problems they consider important or interesting from their point of view. Needless to say, anthropologists, like all other people, are not devoid of emotions, and yet despite the delicate nature of the matter at hand, the volume has not become a vehicle for any kind of propaganda.

The contributions have been written from various perspectives: from nationalist to self-ironic. But even dispassionate observation reveals, through the texts, the authors' beliefs and attitudes toward certain values. Modern anthropology, however, allows the author to be visible through the text, along with his or her convictions. Recognising the need for constant anthropological interpretation, we begin by pointing at several tropes and interpretive suggestions inspired by the texts contained herein.

In our opinion, the mechanism through which a new, symbolic universe is created in particular countries is similar. What differs from country to country is the context and the elements out of which the symbolic reality is built. Everywhere, the new bonds and communities have to be formed at similar levels of social life. After communism, new symbols of national and regional identity are needed, because the communist system destroyed any independent form of social bonds, beginning with the level of local communities. A common trait of various societies is the invocation of folk culture for the purpose of creating new bonds. Especially those aspects of folk culture are utilised which foster the survival of the community.

While the processes of investing reality with symbolic meanings follow similar patterns and take place at the same levels, differences between countries do occur in the areas of ethnographic fact and the tendencies defined by the relevant historical contexts. We realise, for instance, (on the basis of sources other than the present volume) that Czech authors who seek an opportunity to renew certain meanings draw on the 17th- and 18th-century tradition, when folk elements started to be incorporated into the cultural life of the Czech elites – a phenomenon which reached its high point at the time of the Czech National Revival. On the other hand, they point out that local bonds can be built on the old tradition of local government, which formed after 1867, when provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were granted autonomy. This indicates an orientation towards micro-history, towards local facts and contexts, supporting the well-known interpretation given by Josef Kroutvor about the Czechs being inclined to perceive the world from a local perspective (Sochorová 1999; Tomandl 1999).

Similar problems are manifested differently in Slovakia. The Slovaks invoke the stereotypes of folk tradition and a mythologised vision of the Svetopelk Slavonic state as Slovakian heritage. The principal folk motif is the self-stereotype of the Slovak as a herdsman and a robber. In this case, the mechanism is different. The folk content (myth, stereotype, folklore) has been transferred directly to the level of national consciousness, bypassing the local contexts. Besides, the herdsman stereotype is sometimes treated with an ironic distance, which shows its ambiguous – part apologetic and part mocking – character (Krekovicova 1999).

The restitution of social forms took yet a different form in Croatia, where the main point was the restoration of the religious dimension of the folk tradition and a strongly Catholic religious identity, marginalised by the communist regime. Accordingly, this dimension has become a distinct identity marker (Richtman-Augustin 1999). However, this picture should be complemented with other elements of the Croatian reality, connected with the war of 1991–2. The state of Croatian consciousness for the past ten

years has been defined by nationalist sentiments (Ugrešić 1998) and cultural facts determined by wartime experience, as described by Croatian folklorists (Cale-Feldman et al. 1993; Jambrešić-Kirin et al. 1996). Worth pointing out in this context is the mobilising influence of political ritual: the cult of soldier heroes, the suffering of the exiled, the commemorative and therapeutic role of folklore and many other aspects.

The war has left an imprint on the attitudes of all the belligerent parties. The emotional and categorical character of self-identification through symbols, religion or language extends onto the context of other tensions which do not always manifest themselves in open war. It should be borne in mind that research anthropologists participate in this reality also in the capacity of individuals who make highly personal choices.

In the metatext dimension, studies on consciousness and local or national bonds, must take into account a multitude of factors that affect or even determine this consciousness. These include various levels of social participation on the sociological plane, as well as various cultural and linguistic aspects of the phenomena in question. In the present introductory section, I propose a classification which aims to delimit a possibly broad semantic field resulting from the juxtaposition of all the various levels and aspects of the analysis. Before I proceed with the presentation, I would like to make some points (banal though they may sound) about the nature of judgments made in humanities.

Even if they aspire to objectivity, the humanistic disciplines and social sciences are entangled in the contexts of their time. Claims advanced in studies on local or national consciousness reflect the social phobias, conflicts and anxieties, as well as beliefs and values, of the time. Elements of this world of beliefs and values are sometimes transferred by researchers to the level of analysis that strives to describe and explain social reality. What is more, researchers not only study social reality, but also assess it. Through their works, they often try to influence and control social life. Whenever this happens, it is a case of mixing social roles: those of an expert and a politician. But it also may and does happen that certain entrenched convictions about the nature of society petrify some patterns of interpretation which taint the supposedly objective description with a preconceived ideological thesis. Every instance of such an analysis of (national, ethnic, local) consciousness mixes various perspectives: scientific, casual, mythical or ideological. For whenever a description of one's own or someone else's consciousness is attempted, distinct levels or analysis often get unwittingly mixed up.

Science is just one of the cultural modes of articulating phenomena, such as ethnicity, national consciousness, local consciousness or regionalisms. The question whether it can be a privileged mode in judging about such forms of social reality must not remain unanswered. However, the answer will depend on the point of view. In a semiotic description of culture, it is stressed that science is equivalent to other modes of cultural metadescription (Łotman 1984: 99–105). Those other modes of metadescription have been called legend, myth or literature. In interpretations dominated by scientific description, such modes are discredited, because the adopted point of view does not admit of their equivalence. Therefore, in confrontation with science, all casual judgments are rejected as false and classified among superstitions, cultural apocrypha or instances of false consciousness.

However, a more liberal assumption could be adopted: that in matters of consciousness, the mythological dimension of phenomena is equivalent to scientific

convictions. Such a claim opens up a new, significant interpretive perspective. It consists in a metatext search for mythological structures in collective beliefs (including science) and for instances of mixed-up orders of description and explanation. This is made possible by “anthropological irony”, which distributes the focus equitably among all the forms and aspects of cultural utterances.

Thus the “truth” contained in utterances or “superstitions” about one’s own group or an “alien” group pertains to a different reality from the one to which science has granted supremacy – the legendary or mythical reality. It is not the only kind of imagined reality; nor does a single scientific reality exist. There are as many scientific realities as there are paradigms that determine the perception of the world. The distinction between them is conventional only, the way all other distinctions made in culture are conventional. Their conventional character is particularly apparent in their evaluative aspect. For it is hard to judge who is right: the person who claims he is “local” (that is, he is an inhabitant of the given region), or a visitor from the outside who knows this person to be a member of a specific nation, because he uses a given language. For the former, the latter’s judgment will be false, because it disregards his sentiments, and vice versa, the judgment of the “local” will be mythical for the “outsider”, who subscribes to an objectivist concept of nation. The ascription of either of these judgments to the wrong mental reality calls into question its truthfulness and, depending on the adopted point of view, makes this judgment “mythical”, “subjective”, “superstitious” or “irrational”. Such wrong ascriptions take place in all spheres of cultural activity, and science is no exception in this respect.

In the context of the above, let us present several claims and research questions based on the semiotic interpretation of culture in the context of the casual understanding of the identification process that takes place in connection with multicultural contacts, rampant regionalisms, local consciousness and social exchange. This reasoning has been inspired by Jurij Lotman’s discussion of the semiotics of social life and culture in numerous publications of his (Łotman 1983, 1999).

A discussion of these problems should take into account three sociologically different levels of participation: the state, the nation and the ethnic (local) group. This means that, in the abstract, any given “Ego” will be, in most cases, simultaneously a citizen of a state, a member of a nation and a (current or former) member of an ethnic or local group. The levels of “Ego’s” participation in social reality are determined by the types of affiliation and identification. These have an individual and a group dimension. Such a model describes the complex social status of most human beings – citizens of European countries.

Sociologically defined participation levels can be analysed in their cultural, linguistic and social aspects, these being the determinants of an individual’s presence in the world. When the orders in question (participation levels and the said aspects) are superposed, the resulting grid defines the possible interpretations of the problems discussed in this volume. Their full range is presented in the table below. Included in the specific fields are examples of problems which should be addressed when discussing national/regional consciousness and cultural differentiation.

Participation levels	Type of affiliation and identification	Group/individual dimension	Aspects of presence in the world		
			social	cultural	linguistic
	formal, legal, administrative	state, structures, institutions, citizens	ideologies, programmes, declarations, law	territory, borders, political aitiology, (external and internal) enemy, ally	language of politics and administration, persuasion, propaganda, censorship
	consciousness, emotions, ideological motherland	nation, ethnic composition, member of the nation	social bonds, national strata and elites, national character, idiosyncrasies, national consciousness	national symbols, symbols of the motherland, stereotypes, cultural output	language as the yardstick of identity, linguistic stereotypes
	Emotional, private motherland, (small motherland)	minority, ethnic, religious group, local community, local/alien	local programmes, minority institutions, regionalisms, local activists	folk worldview, signs of identity, folklore, custom, stereotypes, phobias	minority languages, dialects, varieties, ethnonyms, nicknames, local toponyms

The phenomena mentioned in the table take different forms of existence in social reality. They are products of collective consciousness and exist as sociocultural facts. The scale of the phenomena in question depends on the scale of participation and they are mutually comparable in this respect. Collectively, these make up a set of facts and beliefs that constitute the (invariably syndromic) forms of collective consciousness.

The existing interpretive possibilities, both in the domain of science and casual thinking, are different at different levels of participation. Sometimes, an interpretation requires thorough professional knowledge; on other occasions a strong, internal conviction is enough. Such is the nature of syndromic phenomena. Using one's anthropological experience and knowledge from other disciplines, it is possible to extend at will the problems listed in the table and provide them with suitable interpretation. Some ways of commenting on selected examples are given below. At the level of formal identification (the state), the constitutions and legal systems of European countries guarantee equal social and cultural rights to the citizens. In the area of politics – amoral by nature – programmes and declarations are ostensibly concerned with the implementation of such fundamental values as freedom, sovereignty, human dignity etc. The gap between the declarations and the social practice of their implementation is a consequence of wishful thinking. Such declarations embody a set of values that reflect the adopted vision of the world and man, which are a domain of myth. Every state's policy provides room, too, for a mythical justification of its political system. The persuasive language serves to promulgate falsehood, relies on euphemisms and insinuations, and is prone to hypostasise meanings. Its use is akin to the magic practices connected with linguistic taboo and with situations when language is believed to have a creative power.

At the level of participation through consciousness, which invokes the concept of nation, one encounters a mythologised version of history. The history of the nation takes the form of a legend, reflecting the values and ideologies to which the nation subscribes. The national signs, symbols and myths are constantly revived as tokens of identity on numerous occasions, from politics to sports. Moreover, the public mood and attitudes in various socially important situations (crises, conflicts) are often projected into a symbolic and mythical universe.

The social, cultural and linguistic phenomena at the levels of emotional bonds and local affiliation are composed of a gamut of facts related to regionalist, local and minority movements. Such movements go to great lengths these days to emphasise their separateness in terms of custom, folklore and dialect. The other side of the coin concerns the difficulties inherent in the struggle against ethnic bias. For instance, the task of eradicating ethnic jokes and offensive ethnic terms is next to hopeless.

As I have mentioned, the problems listed in the table are just a sample of weighty issues, provided as an illustration of the classification principle. The table also brings out the context in which the phenomena in question should be studied. As a final remark, let us reiterate that a sense of national and local identity is a syndrome of phenomena defined by the context of participation and affiliation. Therefore, its study calls for a constant metatext reflection and must not be restricted to a direct diagnosis of cultural differences.

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